



**EUROPE
MUST
ACT.**

MIGRATION, WOMEN AND GENDER

**A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE ON
PEOPLE ON THE MOVE**

**Topic of the Month
Europe Must Act
2024**



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An Introduction to Migration, Women and Gender

We've come a long way since the 1951 refugee convention, which largely only used male pronouns and didn't mention gender throughout the entire document.

Since the 1990s, UNHCR has issued more recent policy documents such as:

- Policy on refugee women[1],
- The Guidelines on the protection of refugee women[2] and
- The Sexual violence against refugees: guidelines on prevention and response[3]

All of which sought to call attention to gendered persecution and the ways gender may affect the experience of someone on the move.

However, as is often the case when it comes to policy, there are still multiple ways that reception conditions, the media, asylum systems and outcomes and many more experiences continue to have a gender bias. Moreover, it has also been highlighted that whilst the need to offer international protection for reasons of gender-related persecution and violence is increasingly acknowledged, in practice it is still not effectively available[4].



Stock image sourced from Pexels

Here, we aim to take a look at this in more detail to explore women's experiences and the way that gender continues to impact refugees.

[1] UNHCR. (1990). *Policy on refugee women*. UNHCR. Geneva.

[2] UNHCR. (1991). *Guidelines on the protection of refugee women*. UNHCR. Geneva.

[3] UNHCR. (1995). *Sexual violence against refugees: guidelines on prevention and response*. UNHCR. Geneva.

[4] Freedman, J. (2012). *Taking Gender Seriously in Asylum and Refugee Policies*. In: Khory, K.R. (eds) *Global Migration*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137007124_3

Possible problems/needs

The grounds for establishing refugee status do not include gender

54. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who is outside of his or her country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, Article I.A.(2). The claim to refugee status by women fearing harsh or inhumane treatment because of having transgressed their society's laws or customs regarding the role of women presents difficulties under this definition. As a UNHCR legal adviser has noted, "transgressing social mores is not reflected in the universal refugee definition." Yet, examples can be found of violence against women who are accused of violating social mores in a number of countries. The offence can range from adultery to wearing of lipstick. The penalty can be death. The Executive Committee of UNHCR has encouraged States to consider women so persecuted as a "social group" to ensure their coverage, but it is left to the discretion of countries to follow this recommendation.

Screenshot taken from the [UNHCR, Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women](#)

How many women and girls are on the move?

According to [UNHCR](#), women make up roughly 50% of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population globally. When we look at the most recent figures for the number of female asylum applicants in the European Union in 2022, there were 253,485 first-time female applicants, which is roughly 29% of all applications.

One study takes a deeper look into why there seems to be a gender disparity in Europe when it comes to asylum applications[5]. Although the common explanation relies on family migration strategies - where men migrate first and then their wives and families follow - this study found that this explanation isn't plausible as the family unification figures don't tend to coincide. Instead, they argue that it is various dimensions of gender inequality found in the country of origin that appear to dictate the likelihood that women will migrate as well as men. For example:

"The higher the share of women relative to the share of men in the origin country labor market, the higher the relative share of female asylum-seekers"[6]

This study helps to demonstrate the way that gender inequality shapes women and their ability to move. Moreover, it exemplifies how many different factors contribute to everyone's migration experience. That identity, culture and lived experience in a person's home country also play a role in shaping their migration decisions before they're even considered to be someone on the move.

[5]Maximilian Schiele (12 Jan 2024): *The Role of Gender in Asylum Migration to Europe: Analyzing Country-Level Factors of Gendered Selection of Asylum Seekers to Europe*, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2023.2298515>

[6] *Ibid*, p11

The Invisibility of Sex and Gender

Not all data collected about people on the move records people's sex and/or gender. This creates a problem, as it makes it difficult to understand how an individual's gender or sex affects their migration process. As a consequence, it becomes difficult to plan or cater for a variety of needs, to create policy or migration programmes that benefit everyone and to mitigate against sex or gender-based vulnerabilities.

This has been highlighted as a particular issue when looking at how gender impacts internal displacement and forced migration.

According to the Joint Data Center, women are more likely to experience internal displacement than men. However, both their report and the International Displacement Monitoring Center point out that much of the data surrounding international displacement isn't disaggregated by sex-making it difficult to understand the impacts of gender and diverse experiences.

Global numbers of internally displaced women and girls

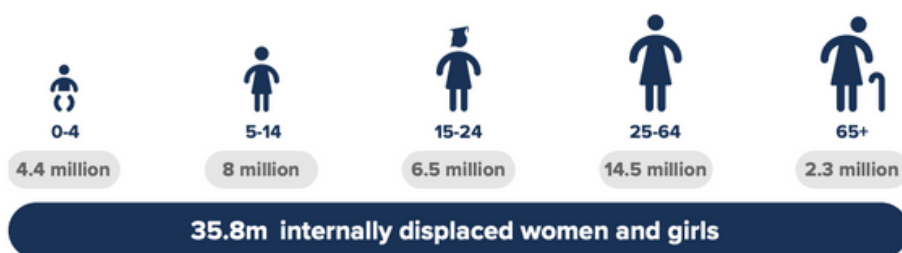


Figure 5: Global estimate of the number of women and girls living in internal displacement due to conflict, violence and disasters at the end of 2022

Image sourced from the iDMC Report, Gender dynamics in internal displacement

Similarly, in the context of climate migration, while the UN states that "Deeply entrenched gender inequalities and discriminatory social and cultural norms may limit women's opportunities to migrate and increase their risks at all stages of migration, especially to gender-based violence and other human rights violations."

There remains a lack of data that is disaggregated by sex and gender, which creates serious difficulties when it comes to successfully implementing and developing more regular migration routes, particularly as an adaptation strategy to cope with climate change.

Simply put, by failing to collect sex and gender information we struggle to ask the right questions, produce impactful solutions and issues of gender inequality are made invisible or misunderstood.

Ways That Gender Impacts Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Gender impacts people who migrate in a variety of ways. It may impact their decision to migrate in the first place. It may decide the possibilities they have of migrating – the knowledge, the skills and the contacts they have. And, on arrival, it may shape the opportunities they get during and after asylum procedures.

Gender and migrant status expose people to multiple forms of discrimination that can make them especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation. According to the European Agency for Asylum, it is thus “fundamental that gender considerations are integrated into the asylum procedure”.

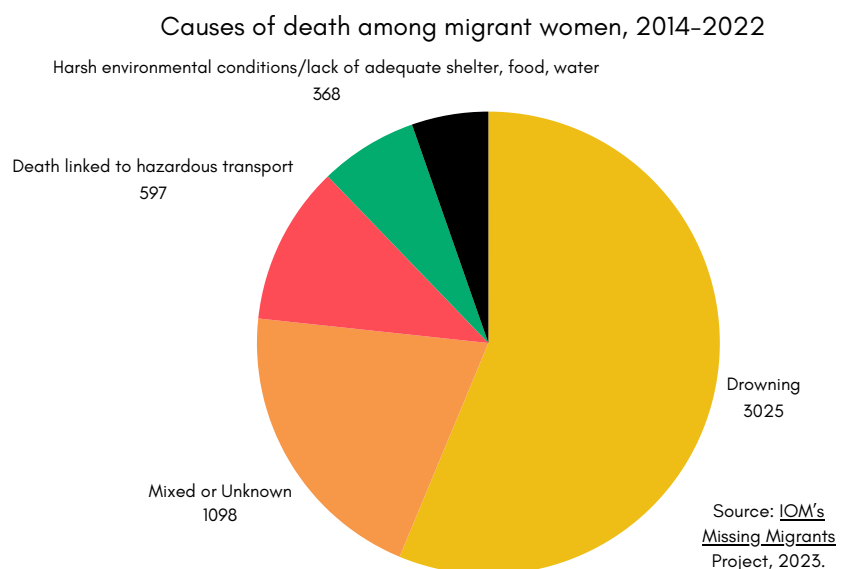
Unequal access to opportunities & more exposure to risk

As indicated previously, women have long been ignored as active subjects of migration. They were simply seen as insignificant or just passively following men. This changed with feminist discourse from the 1980s and 90s. By now, migration is regarded by many as a highly *gendered process* affecting everyone on the move.[7]

For women, gendered discrimination is often the very reason that they feel the need to migrate. In a survey[8] in Spain, the majority of female respondents had travelled alone and mentioned having fled from domestic abuse or patriarchal structures such as arranged marriages or female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). On the other hand, women or those who take on care responsibilities may not even make it to a migration route: their immobility being caused by gendered responsibilities.

According to the Migration Data Portal, women face various hurdles when migrating. For instance, women tend to be more likely to take risky migration routes due to a lack of access to adequate information about which route to take. They also tend to take on caring responsibilities on the move which makes them even more vulnerable:

“Many women [on the Western Mediterranean Route] were pregnant or cared for their children on board, limiting their chances of survival.”



[7] A. Christou & E. Kofman (2022): *Gender and Migration*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91971-9>

[8] E. Guallar Ariño (2023): *Women & Girls on the Move: A Snapshot of Available Evidence*, URL: https://www.migrationdataportal.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1251/files/2023-03/GDI%20Briefs_Gender_Issue_09-03.pdf

Additionally, women have less access to labour admission schemes that could facilitate entry into a host country and enable them to build a solid foundation there. These schemes tend to target highly-skilled workers from professions in industrial sectors where women are less represented. Instead, women may end up working in care sectors, especially as domestic workers. This kind of labour is, in many cases, informal – at least 3.1 million people work informally in this sector in the EU – exposing workers to exploitation and abuse without adequate protection of their rights.

This kind of disadvantage continues during the asylum process. One analysis found that in Germany, the support and access that migrant women get in order to obtain adequate employment, depends not only on their ‘prospect to remain’ but also on assumptions regarding their ability to work productively in the first place:

“Being a woman and a (single) mother who due to her gender, a long history of forced migration and the ‘wrong’ country of origin has had less access to education all her life, may render it all the more difficult to access protection, further education, and financial support in a workfarist regime that relies on assumptions as to potential productivity.”[9]

Apart from access to basic rights, women also tend to be less represented in official decision-making structures. UNHCR has reflected that they are “significantly underrepresented in peacebuilding and formal peace processes” even though women tend to be active in informal crisis responses.

Increased experience of violence

Whilst **migration isn’t inherently dangerous**, people who have or are migrating are often made vulnerable due to issues such as discrimination, power imbalances and systemic or structural violence.

Understanding violence and vulnerabilities

The violence experienced by people on the move manifests in a multitude of different ways, from physical and sexual violence to bureaucratic and structural violence and the violence of uncertainty.

Despite the frequent emphasis placed on women’s vulnerability[10], it is important to highlight that these different forms of violence aren’t limited to any one particular group. When it comes to sexual violence, in particular, there can be a focus on women’s experiences to the exclusion of other at-risk groups[11].

[9] M. Maaroufi (2022): *Contingent Conjunctures and Infrastructures of Racial Capitalism: Activating and Confining Refugees after the Summer of Migration*, *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*, <https://doi.org/10.54718/MOZG3895>

[10] J. Freedman, (2010), ‘Mainstreaming gender in refugee protection’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 23, Number 4, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2010.523820

[11] Saime Ozcurumez, Selin Akyuz & Hannah Bradby (2021) *The Conceptualization problem in research and responses to sexual and gender-based violence in forced migration*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 30:1, 66–78, DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2020.1730163

This creates a complex problem, firstly, as this depiction of women plays into gender stereotypes and leans into paternalistic ideas that infantilise women (particularly women from the global south). On top of this, as much as women's vulnerability is emphasised, other vulnerable and marginalised groups often struggle to gain recognition or support.

However, at the same time, **this is not to say that women aren't vulnerable to sexual or other types of violence, but rather a reminder that gender is one of many factors that increase the potential to experience violence while on the move.**



Stock image sourced from [Unsplash](#)

Sexual violence whilst on the move

When taking a gendered perspective on the violence experienced by those on the move, we find that women and girls do disproportionately experience sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). An estimated one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in her lifetime, worldwide.

The 2019 trafficking report found that women are particularly vulnerable to human and sex traffickers. Much of this is due to global gender and sex inequalities. Women and girls may rely more heavily on family and community structures for their safety, so they are left more vulnerable when this is removed. Similarly, issues such as a lack of privacy in refugee camps or while on the move also often leave these groups more vulnerable.

As mentioned, women are not the only groups vulnerable to SGBV. The same 2019 report found that LGBTQ+ persons are also found to be targeted and exploited by sex traffickers. Another study on gender-based violence and asylum deterrence policies found that 100% of LGBTQ+ respondents had faced sexual violence, demonstrating how prolific the experience of gender-based and sexual violence is, as well as the vulnerability of all marginalised refugees.

The table below demonstrates how prolific sexual violence is along migration routes and the corresponding report describes how sexual violence may take the form of retaliation, coercion, intimidation or as a form of payment. It also points out that some sexual violence may not take a 'form' and is only a product of a "demonstration of power, misogyny, racism or sexual gratification."(p43)

	IOM's report ⁹²	UNHCR's report ⁹³	MMC's report ⁹⁴	UNODC Observatory data	Médecins du Monde's report ⁹⁵
Percentage of female migrants/refugees reporting sexual violence (including as witnesses)	19%	19%	18%	34%	53%
Percentage of male migrants/refugees reporting sexual violence (including as witnesses)	6%	6%	4%	12%	19%

Figure 9 – Prevalence of sexual violence by gender: figures provided in reports published by various organizations in 2020 (figures from IOM, UNHCR and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) have for source a 4Mi survey; Médecins du Monde's questions were limited to abuses committed in Libya)⁹⁶

Image sourced from a [UNODC report, 2022](#)

On top of this, the table also serves as a reminder that sexual violence isn't limited to women and girls. While a smaller percentage of men report sexual violence, according to these figures, between 4 and 19% of men have also been affected. Another [article published by the refugee law project](#) also highlights how failing to acknowledge these men can have unintended consequences, as

"posters and SGBV referral pathways currently developed by the majority of service providers, especially in refugee hosting areas, seldom depict men and boys as survivors of sexual violence. Rather, they portray men as perpetrators worthy of police custody, and women and girls as survivors. This has negative consequences on information sharing and service uptake. From my close interaction with male survivors, it takes a great deal of time and courage for a male survivor of sexual violence to 'finally' share his sexual violence experience with a service provider."

Looking at this information together therefore proves to be crucial to protect all refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable people on the move from this widespread form of violence.

Violence in the workplace

It is also worth noting that violence isn't only experienced by people while on the move. Migrant women are also likely to experience violence in the workplace. [The Lloyd's Register Foundation World Risk Poll](#) found that globally, 30% of migrant women say that they have experienced violence and harassment at work, compared to 21% of women working in their country.

The same report also found that there are multiple layers of discrimination and vulnerability, as 68% of women from the poorest income groups, who have also experienced discrimination based on their skin colour, say they have experienced violence and harassment at work. This, once again, demonstrates the difficulties of only looking at one factor, such as gender; the need for an intersectional approach and the ways that multiple layers of discrimination can be experienced and manifest in violence.

Entering the Host Community - Access to the Labour Market, Housing and Healthcare

It will always be difficult to generalise when it comes to refugee women and their access to work, housing and healthcare. There are so many different factors which will also vary their importance depending on the European country. However, there are some trends and findings that we believe are important to highlight here.

Work

Often, refugees work in what can be described as the “secondary labour market”, where jobs are low-paid, precarious and with limited access to union support or career progression. Like many other types of migrants, refugees, often suffer from what is known as the de-skilling process. This is where people face difficulties transferring their skills and education after migrating and, therefore, have to work in positions that don’t match their experience or qualifications.

This issue has been described as particularly applicable to women and refugee women who often struggle to find work outside of the realms of care and domestic work, such as childcare, care for the elderly and household cleaning.

What this demonstrates is a double inequality. Where refugees generally suffer from a lack of employment options and opportunities that reflect their education and skill level combined with structures of gender inequality, which result in women being further disadvantaged when it comes to joining the labour market.

This gross inequality and gap in the labour market is inextricably linked to a socioeconomic gap in refugee women’s status; their ability to provide decent and stable living conditions; and their higher potential to be and to feel politically and socially marginalised.

[12] IOM, *CRUSHED HOPES: Underemployment and deskilling among skilled migrant women*, IOM, 2015, available at: <https://publications.iom.int/books/crushed-hopes-underemployment-and-deskilling-among-skilled-migrant-women>

[13] Freedman, J. (2009), *Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees in France*, UNHCR Legal and Protection Policy Research Series, June, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/no-13-female-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-france-jane-freedman>

Housing

Having a home and access to housing has a huge impact on a person's ability to transition into their new community. On top of shelter, it provides security, a fixed address point, access to a community and support, and is an important health and well-being determinant.

However...

"Refugees have to face critical obstacles in the access to housing: reception system solutions are often insufficient to respond to their housing needs, especially in the long term. Moreover, landlords very often show strong prejudices based on race, ethnic origin, gender, and economic means. The consequence is that, in most host cities, refugees are subject to segregation in specific areas or neighbourhoods."

Both men and women who have fled from their home country encounter difficulties and discrimination when it comes to finding a sustainable housing solution and this has disastrous consequences. When looking at the consequences for women, UNHCR has cited that this has led to women being sexually exploited by landlords and instances of them being placed under house arrest in order to avoid police controls[14].

Whilst families are often prioritized, single men and women are seen as less of a priority and therefore forced to rely on other types of emergency accommodations or support from friends or family in the community[15].

Furthermore, queer and transgender refugee men and women are at a particularly high risk of abuse in their host community and at a higher risk of exclusion. This 2020 report, highlights specific challenges, such as, "A reliance on Queer refugees who can "pass" as heterosexual or cisgender are often tasked to engage landlords in negotiating rent and signing leases". Demonstrating how discrimination towards transgender men and women makes them particularly vulnerable to situations of power imbalance and, in some cases, susceptible to violence and coercion.

The same report also offers a solution. They describe how community-based housing for smaller groups of queer people, that incorporates holistic protection programming (such as access to skills and vocational training and provides cash assistance to cover basic needs) would allow queer refugees to adjust to their new community as well as reduce their risk of harm and exclusion.



[14] UNHCR (2008), *UNHCR Handbook for the protection of women and girls*, January, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/47cfa9fe2.html>

[15] Freedman, J. (2009), *Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees in France*, UNHCR Legal and Protection Policy Research Series, June, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/no-13-female-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-france-jane-freedman>

Healthcare

All refugees should have access to the same or similar health care as host populations. However, there are still significant barriers when it comes to this access and specific gender-related barriers.

These may be **organisational barriers**, such as language, information access and understanding of the new healthcare system; **social barriers**, such as financial or transportation issues; or **personal and cultural barriers**, such as discrimination and racism, misunderstandings, lack of a female doctor and lack of connection with healthcare professionals leading to reduced confidence and trust. Highlighting how simply having the services available doesn't necessarily reduce these barriers to access[16].

Recent research by Freedman et al.[17] also explains how a combination of negative migration discourses, economic and housing vulnerability and an increased likelihood of dependency, mean that women face health and specifically sexual and reproductive health (SRH) challenges combined with sexual violence. Describing how although "[t]he Sustainable Development Goals call for universal access to SRH by 2030...it is difficult to see how this will be achieved for women asylum seekers and refugees"[18] and calls for more attention to be brought to women asylum seekers and refugees in urban settings and not just in refugee camps.

Whilst the paper's devastating conclusion highlights the extent to which refugee and asylum-seeking women are disadvantaged when it comes to SRH, it also reminds us that much of this is due to women's social, political and economic circumstances. That women aren't inherently victims or vulnerable, thus emphasising that this is something that can be changed.

[16] European Commission, Requested by the FEMM committee (2021), *The traumas endured by refugee women and their consequences for integration and participation in the EU host country*, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, PE 691.875

[17] Jane Freedman, Tamaryn L. Crankshaw & Victoria M. Mutambara (2020) *Sexual and reproductive health of asylum seeking and refugee women in South Africa: understanding the determinants of vulnerability*, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 28:1, 1758440, DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2020.1758440

[18] *Ibid*, p332

Trafficking, refugees and sex work



Stock image sourced from Unsplash

It is no secret that migrants are very vulnerable to human trafficking – especially along unsafe migration routes. According to the World Migration Report, it is often migrants from especially socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and from low-income countries who are trafficked to richer countries. As we have pointed out here, women tend to seek more informal migration routes which makes them also more vulnerable to trafficking. Additionally, human trafficking affects women in specific ways:

“Trafficking is highly gendered; women and girls are more susceptible to trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced marriage and domestic servitude, while men and boys are more commonly victims of trafficking in the fishing and mining industries”

[19] F.N. Yousaf (2017) *Forced Migration, human trafficking, and human security*, *Current Sociology Monograph*, 66:2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392117736309>

Official international policies on human trafficking have only existed since 2000, though many policies actually seem to make conditions worse for those affected by it.

One example of such policies would be the so-called 'Khartoum Process', a collaborative migration program between European countries and several countries from North-East Africa. One of its focal points is to tackle human trafficking along the migration route between these countries. According to the network Migration Control, in practice, it externalises Europe's border regime and supports authoritarian governments who are supposed to control migration movements at the 'roots'.

As a consequence, according to several reports from human rights groups, most effort goes into the restriction of migration instead of creating safe routes. This in turn creates even riskier migration and actually increases trafficking, as exemplified in the case of Sudan:

"Sudan has an active cross-border migrant transport network. Prior to 2015, many of these transport facilitators were ordinary Sudanese drivers who were approached by people desiring to get to Libya or Egypt. Since 2015, increased security at borders has narrowed the providers down to those who have no fear of border patrols, namely the military and security forces themselves, who have profited on both sides of the migration-security nexus."

The conclusion is that only the creation of safe migration routes will be able to stop human trafficking from happening. This would benefit especially women or other marginalized genders who are otherwise very vulnerable to exploitation along irregular migration routes.

Trafficking is often misunderstood and oversimplified - many people are aware that they will cross a border but are lied to at other parts of the process. This can often lead to misguided policies. As a 2019 report from the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) points out:

"Evidence shows that anti-prostitution, anti-immigration and anti-trafficking policies negatively impact fundamental human rights of an already marginalised and vulnerable group, such as the right to health and safety and right to organise."

The report shows that these policies tend to affect migrant and racialised workers a lot as they have less access to support structures and have little visibility.

Sex Work

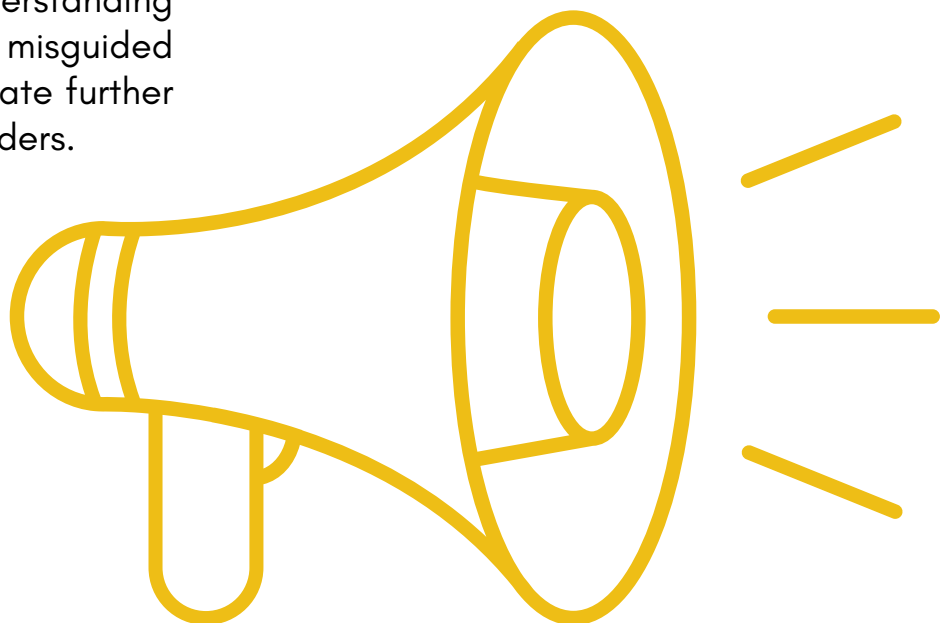
Migrant women make up a big part of Western Europe's sex workers. The European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) dives deeper into the reasons behind it, explaining terms like 'sexualised racialisation' and the consequences until today.

A second report of ESWA describes how undocumented migrants in particular have many difficulties finding adequate work, housing and healthcare. Legally, they cannot access many institutions while at the same time being discriminated against by employers or landlords due to racism, sexism and anti-trans hatred (or else, transmisia). Sex work may be one of the few options for earning an income.

As sex work is largely criminalized throughout Europe, working in this field often ends up marginalizing migrant sex workers even more. For instance, in many European countries obtaining legal citizenship is dependent on a person's employment status. This creates a vicious cycle where migrants are trapped in irregular status and subjected to exploitation and violence, with limited recourse to justice.

It is important to note here, that sex work cannot and should not be conflated with trafficking and exploitation alone. This narrative ends up portraying sex workers as mainly passive and without agency. It may, indeed, backfire and lead to further marginalization of sex workers. Instead, let's listen to what organized sex workers themselves have to say.

Coming full circle, this is just another example of how the misunderstanding of gender issues promotes misguided and harmful policies that create further hurdles to safely crossing borders.



Gender Stereotypes

In asylum procedures, both women and men face gendered stereotypes. In the case of men, some researchers argue that assumptions about the roles they take as family leaders or their masculinity might have a negative impact on their asylum procedures[20]. Sexual violence against men on migration routes is common but is rarely tackled and there is not much research into it.

Gendered norms also impact boys and men right from the start in the chances they have to establish a good life: According to UNESCO, worldwide boys have a higher school drop-out rate than girls and may stop their education to work for their families or simply out of 'masculinity' reasons. While girls continue to face severe disadvantages and inequalities in education, the report shows that boys in many countries are at greater risk than girls of repeating grades, failing to complete different education levels and having poorer learning outcomes in school. This greatly impacts the opportunities they have in life and also when migrating.

Gendered norms around femininity and masculinity also play a role in the experiences of gay and queer migrants. Homosexuality and queerness are marginalized and/or criminalized to varying degrees around the world and in some places, they are even punished with the death sentence. (It is important, hereby, to consider colonial traces.) Many people flee from this kind of discrimination to Europe, as officially, EU policies encourage the LGBTIQ community. This is in many cases misleading as the LGBTIQ community and especially migrants remain marginalized also here[21].

During asylum procedures, LGBTIQ in Europe face various challenges, such as having to prove being persecuted in the country of origin on the grounds of sexuality or gender identity, being forcibly outed as queer in screening procedures at borders, being falsely accommodated and/or facing discrimination and harassment in reception centres, among others. Vice has collected some experiences of queer migrants in the Netherlands, for example.

Women and Climate Migration

Climate-induced forced displacement usually refers to those who are forced to evacuate due to emergencies such as flooding, storms or extreme droughts. However, a considerable amount of displacement is also caused as people struggle to access the resources they need to adapt when existing livelihoods are disrupted and destroyed due to climate change.

[20] P. Mascini & M. Bochove (2009): *Gender Stereotyping in the Dutch Asylum Procedure. 'Independent' Men versus 'Dependent' Women*, in: *International Migration Review*, 112-133.

[21] R. Mole (ed.), 2021: *Queer Migration and Asylum in Europe*. UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv17ppe7d>

[22] Harpreet Kaur Paul & Dalia Gebrial (2021), 'Climate linked-migration: The right to move and the right to stay' Chapter 7 in 'Perspectives on a global green new deal', Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, ISBN 978-1-5262-0870-5

As with other forms of migration, environmental and climate-forced migration is also a gendered process. This is because existing structures of inequality become magnified due to natural disasters and climate change.

“Women and girls, especially those from marginalized groups, experience poorer displacement and migration outcomes due to their pre-existing inequalities and traditional gender roles and expectations. The negative impacts of environmental migration and disaster displacement are also exacerbated for marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities, migrants with irregular status, LGBTI persons and elderly persons, due to their particular vulnerabilities, heightened risk of violence and societal exclusion.[23]”

Gender inequalities shape much of the migration process, whether it's the decision and ability to migrate or the level of safety experienced whilst on the move. This is for a variety of reasons, but poverty and experiences of violence are often highlighted:

Poverty and unequal access to resources

The ability to move and how a migration experience is shaped, is dependent on access to resources, as social, cultural and economic capital are combined to create possibilities or limitations[24]. For example, passport type, access to money, family ties or knowledge of other languages will all contribute to a person's ability to migrate and the choices available to them.

Women and girls continue to be more likely to live in poverty[25], as, amongst other factors, they struggle to access education and bear the brunt of unpaid care and domestic work. As with other marginalized groups, this lack of resources limits women's capacity to migrate in the wake of climate change. On top of this, gender roles and behaviour restrictions often dictate that women stay to take care of family members whilst men go in search of better opportunities as well as having less power when it comes to the migration decision-making process.



Stock image sourced from Unsplash

[23] A. Bleeker and others (2021), “Advancing gender equality in environmental migration and disaster displacement in the Caribbean”, Studies and Perspectives series-ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean, No. 98 (LC/TS.2020/188-LC/CAR/TS.2020/8), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), p24

[24] Nicholas Van Hear (2014), *Reconsidering Migration and Class*. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford

[25] UN Women (2022), ‘Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2022’, *United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)*.

Combined, women's ability to protect themselves in the aftermath of climate-induced destruction and their ability to use migration as a strategy to adapt to climate change is limited. Illuminating the other side of the coin when it comes to forced migration and asylum—those who get left behind.

Vulnerability in moments of climate crisis

As previously touched upon, women have been cited as more vulnerable to risks such as abuse, discrimination, exploitation, and Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including trafficking in persons, and face challenges in accessing sanitation, and sexual, and reproductive and mental health services.

Desaia and Mandalb[26] explain that whilst climate change and extreme weather events affect entire populations, women suffer from double victimisation. They explain this as being due to a crisis breaking down societal and family protections and resulting in an increase in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). They provide examples that show how an increase in SGBV was recorded in the aftermath of the 1997 and 2010 earthquakes in Japan; following Hurricane Katrina in the USA, and in Uganda during droughts and prolonged dry spells, where women were more likely to face domestic abuse, child marriage, and female genital mutilation (FGM).

This trend of increased violence following a climate disaster extends into women's climate-induced migration experience. As they can face a heightened risk of trafficking, SGBV and discrimination in transit and at borders. In particular, women in refugee camps and other situations where there is a lack of privacy, as they report "a high level of sexual violence during sleep, washing, bathing, and dressing in emergency shelters, tents, or camps.[27]"

Whilst this vulnerability while migrating extends past climate-induced migration, it also stands to demonstrate the intersection between climate change, migration and experiences of violence. Existing vulnerabilities and gender inequalities mean that whilst climate destruction is impacting men and women, the impacts on women are heightened as they have less access to adaptation strategies, and are more vulnerable in the aftermath of climate disasters.

[26] B.H. Desai and M. Mandal. 2021. "Role of Climate Change in Exacerbating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Women: A New Challenge for International Law." *Environmental Policy and Law* 51: 137-157.

[27] *Ibid*, p 140.

The need for women's voices and participation

Women's vulnerability when it comes to climate change and climate-induced migration necessitates the inclusion of women's voices when it comes to decision-making processes and climate policy.



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There is a clear need to take a gendered perspective when considering how climate migration is managed and the provision of support and adaptation strategies to mitigate against the economic vulnerabilities that accompany climate breakdown.

Moreover, despite the vulnerabilities depicted above, women's voices aren't just necessitated to mitigate against gender inequality and violence in the context of climate change. A [UN Case Study](#) on women in East Africa also highlights how women are often on the frontline of combatting climate change and, as such, they are critical to leading the efforts in strengthening communities and resistance against climate change:

"Due to their critical role in agriculture, food security, livelihoods, income generation, and natural resource and household management, they are equipped to meaningfully contribute to the development of climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and practices and to address inequalities, ultimately contributing to building more resilient communities" (p19).

Emphasising that the gendered elements of climate change and climate is not just a story of how gender inequality exacerbates women's lived experiences. Instead, it's a lesson in how by amplifying women's voices, providing safer migration routes and valuing their role in agriculture and household management; communities can be strengthened, women can gain access to new opportunities and the extreme impacts of gender disparities when it comes to climate change can be reduced.

A Gendered Perspective on the New EU Pact on Asylum and Migration

In December 2023, it was announced that the European Parliament and Council had reached a political agreement when it came to the latest EU Pact on Asylum and Migration. While there have been a variety of organisations that have spoken out against the difficulties that this pact may present when put into practice, some have also highlighted the issues of gender within this pact.

The pact fails to acknowledge many of the gendered elements of migration that we have outlined here. This is particularly the case when it comes to what will be called the “pre-screening process”, where those entering the European Union territory will be assessed on their reason for arriving as well as their vulnerability.

Despite this focus on vulnerability, there is no mention of requiring specialists when it comes to vulnerabilities such as trafficking and sexual abuse. Nor is there a recognition of issues such as many women struggling to tell their story to an interviewer (putting them at a disadvantage in this (proposed) 5-7 day process); and that many officials lack proper training on gendered issues meaning that they’re unable to ask the right questions and properly assess the evidence. Ultimately, creating a disadvantage for many who suffer from gender inequality and increasingly the possibility that they will not be able to enter the EU to have their claim fairly assessed.

This is just one of many examples of how policies and asylum systems have gendered impacts. With very few countries in Europe specifically acknowledging gendered persecution as a reason for asylum (often it is recognised as grounds for membership of a social group) or having Gender Guidelines when it comes to asylum decisions, it is easy to see how issues of gender, gendered experiences and gendered persecution will continue to be under-acknowledged.

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum

‘We will take a human and humane approach. Saving lives at sea is not optional. And those countries who fulfil their legal and moral duties or are more exposed than others, must be able to rely on the solidarity of our whole European Union... Everybody has to step up here and take responsibility.’

President von der Leyen, State of the Union Address 2020

Screenshot taken from the [Document 52020DC0609 European Commission](#)

Important voices, solutions and other resources

- International Women* Space (based in Berlin/Germany)
- Women in Exile (based in Brandenburg/Germany)
- Women for Refugee Women (based in the UK)
- Gender and Migration - IMISCOE Short Reader (Open Access)
- Pads4Refugees (Projects in Greece)
- Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria (Bulgaria)



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***We're volunteers and asylum and migration is a complex topic. This means we try to include a variety of opinions and approaches to a topic. We do our best to research and use our expertise accurately however, we also believe it's vital to encourage healthy discussion and stop misinformation. Therefore we encourage any feedback or constructive criticism of our work.**

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Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane and dignified reception of refugees in Europe.



**Europe Must Act
2024**